

## CCEE-CEC Joint Statement

It is with great concern that Christian, Jewish and Muslim organisations in Europe take note of a proposal tabled in the Icelandic parliament Althing to ban non-medically indicated circumcision of male children. If the proposal were made into law, parents could face up to six years in prison if they have religious circumcision performed on a boy child.

This move would not only amount to an infringement of the fundamental human right of Freedom of Religion or Belief, but would also be perceived as a signal that people with a Jewish or Muslim background are no longer welcome to Iceland.

Circumcision has for thousands of years been practised by religious communities across the faith spectrum; it is a fundamental feature of religious practise in Judaism, Islam and some Christian traditions, such as the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches. Circumcision is not an optional ceremony, but at the very core of religious practice. It is with this particular religious rite that male children are welcomed to their religion, providing them a sign of God's covenant with humanity. For these communities, it is an integral expression of faith.

"It is important that circumcision is practised legally, in a medically appropriate and safe setting, so that the child's health is not jeopardized", says CEC President Bishop Christopher Hill and adds that "We should not forget that it is a right recognised in the UN convention of the rights of the child to belong to and to be educated in the religious tradition of his or her family."

He also draws attention to the fact that circumcision is a standard secular medical procedure in several countries – with established medical guidelines – which can even be beneficial. It cannot, therefore, be argued that the intervention amounts to an unacceptable violation of corporeal integrity. Thus, such a limitation of freedom of religion or belief cannot be justified by objective reasons.

Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, President of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), also recalled how "the Catholic Church is particularly committed to defending the child's right, which also includes the right – the duty of the family to educate their children according to their own religious convictions. This initiative is against religious freedom and the principles of democracy proper to a civil society".

'Prohibiting circumcision in a given country amounts to that very country publicly declaring that no Jewish community is welcome on its territory any longer,' says Albert Guigui, Chief Rabbi of Brussels and Permanent representative of the Conference of European Rabbis to the European Institutions.

Chief Imam Razawi, Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society, also says that "Forbidding a religious rite in this way would amount to banning the ability to practice faith for Muslims".

The Jewish, Christian and Muslim organisations agree that a ban on circumcision in Iceland would amount to outlawing two world religions, Judaism and Islam, and their adherents.

This law would render a xenophobic image of Iceland in a religiously and culturally diverse world. Should this proposal go through it also risks inspiring similar initiatives in other European countries and beyond.

In a climate of growing antisemitism and islamophobia this could encourage such tendencies elsewhere, increasing the pressure on often already vulnerable communities.

The organisations emphasise that they refer to male circumcision only. This compulsory religious rite must not be confused with the cruel practice of female genital mutilation that constitutes an assault on the bodily integrity of women, violating their basic human rights and dignity.

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**The Conference of European Churches (CEC)** is a fellowship of some 116 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe, plus 40 national councils of churches and organisations in partnership. CEC was founded in 1959. It has offices in Brussels and Strasbourg.

**The Council of European Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE)** currently gathers 33 European Bishops' Conferences, represented by their Presidents, plus the Archbishops of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of Chişinău (Moldova Rep.), the Eparchial Bishop of Mukachevo and the Apostolic Administrator of Estonia. The President is Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa; Vice-Presidents are Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, and Msgr Stanisław Gądecki, Archbishop of Poznań. The Secretary General is Mgr Duarte da Cunha. The Secretariat is based at St Gallen (Switzerland) [www.ccee.eu](http://www.ccee.eu)